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AUTHOR Cassara, Beverly B.
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ABSTRACT

Around the world, women suffer oppression to various degrees. In the United States, they have a difficult time rising in corporations or having their ideas taken seriously. In some other countries, they are abused and overworked. Some women in Norway are concerned that their country's entrance into the European Community will mean an end to the humanitarian and egalitarian nature of their country. Women in the former East Germany feel they have lost more than they have gained in some cases, such as the loss of jobs, day care, and abortion rights. Women in Kenya, Guatemala, and India often suffer at the hands of men and of the government. Adult education has a role to play for all women. Women can gain knowledge and strength from mutual study, and they can use this knowledge to gain political power. They can also use adult education to foster acceptance of cultural pluralism, which will be necessary for a better world in the future. (KC)

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CONCERNS OF WOMEN AROUND THE WORLD
THE RESPONSIBILITIES OF THE ADULT EDUCATION MOVEMENT

by

Dr. Beverly B. Cassara
Adjunct Professor of Adult Education
University of Southern Maine

for

THE WOMEN'S ROUNDTABLE,
INTERNATIONAL ADULT EDUCATION CONFERENCE
AMERICAN ASSOCIATION OF ADULT AND CONTINUING EDUCATION

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Address:
Rt. 2 Box 116
Bethel, Maine 04217

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What an interesting week to be talking about women's issues! One week ago today the United States Senate postponed the vote on the nomination of Judge Clarence Thomas to the Supreme Court because one woman came forward to protest. (She accused Thomas of sexual harassment.) Since it takes unanimous approval to postpone a vote, the Senate, by its action, spoke up loud and clear, for once, that women must be heard. Mind you, they almost swept us under the rug again, but as it turned out, this is something of a watershed moment in American life. In articulating definitions of sexual harassment, and judging it in this particular case, the consciousness of the country has been raised, and there is no going back, no matter what the result of the vote that is taking place this evening. (Nomination was approved.)

By this recognition of the importance and rights of women in the workplace, a new door has been opened for women, for women have gained a new bit of respect generally, which can be carried over into many areas of life. This means a new challenge to women to step up and out smartly and take an increasingly responsible positions in enhancing the quality of life on this earth. If sometimes we get tired of the struggle, and want to say "What is the use?" Well, this is no time for that. This is the moment of opportunity to make real strides in dealing with the important issues of our times.

I would like to take a moment to speak of the book: <u>Women's Ways of Knowing</u> by Belenky and others which my adult education class at the University of Southern Maine was discussing last night. The younger women in the class and the two men took issue with the approach. They feel that now in 1991, we should be discussing <u>human</u> ways of knowing, that men need understanding in this regard as well as women. However, the older women in the class resonated to the message. They recognized the unfair ladder they had climbed from little girlhood with their thoughts and ideas not heard, silenced, or forced to adapt in a system that essentially did not respect female intelligence. Class members wanted so much to believe that the opportunities are all there for women nowadays that women just have to wake up and grasp them.

We all know it may not be quite so easy as that yet. The statistics tell a story.

--only 5 of the CEO's of the Fortune Five Hundred Companies are women.

--98 of the 100 U.S. Senators are male

--and coming closer to home for me, in my twenty years at the University of the District of Columbia, where we had at least five presidential searches during that time, no woman ever appeared on the final short list for the position.

Let's look at the ICAE STUDY ON WOMEN IN ADULT EDUCATION. In the worldwide work of the International Council for Adult Education, women have suffered discrimination and sexual harassment and especially insensitivity to the need for respect for all women and the leadership contribution they can make in the work of the International Council for Adult Education in all regions of the world. A Taskforce on the Participation of Women in ICAE was established a couple years ago. At the present time this taskforce is carrying out a study on the participation of women in adult education activities worldwide. It will be a very difficult task, but it will be a start. I, myself, will be interviewing some of our leaders here this week to get their opinions, and I would welcome thoughts and opinions of any of you.

In discussing the progress of professional women in adult education at the university level, our AAACE president, Dr. Bill Griffith suggested the following: "If we are to assume that the present recruitment process is not the same as it once was, then we can [still] anticipate that the changes which will make the ratio of men and women more nearly 50:50 will take some years and some retirements to work its way through the system. Overnight corrections are not feasible and using two sets of standards is demeaning as well."

Dr. Griffith is a very fair, honorable and reasonable person, so I can accept this statement from him. However, it would be all too easy to let this reason, as expressed by Bill, become an excuse, especially since we do have to recognize that oftentimes, there are already two standards, however subtle--women sometimes have to be super-qualified to compete with men of average qualifications.

Now let me turn our attention to women in other countries. Such a big topic, the only way I feel comfortable in addressing it, is to speak mostly of some situations which I know through experience. Therefore, I will address some concerns of women in the Nordic countries, the women in the former East Germany, Kenya, and Thailand. But I also want to mention something about Native American women in Guatemala, and also some of the women's efforts in India.

I think it would be safe to say that women in the Nordic countries have perhaps the most equitable situation of women anywhere in the world. These are governments which have as a first concern the quality of life of all their people, and that includes women equally. The president of Iceland is a woman and the famous Bruntland report on planetary ecology was produced by a committee headed by the former female Prime Minister of Norway. I am speaking about them today, because the women in these countries are worried that by joining the European Community, they will lose many of their benefits. They feel that the European Community is so geared toward economic success that their countries will no longer be allowed the privilege of paying the cost of good human services. I heard about an organization

called, "Nordic Women Against the EC" and I wrote to a friend in Norway to get more information. I do want to give her great credit for the effort she made to obtain this information for me. It was truly an act of commitment to friendship and concern for sharing information. There being no literature in English, she sat at her computer and translated the brochure for me. The Nordic women actually share concerns that are expressed by women from the former East Germany related to the quality of life for women in their countries.

Secondly, let's look at the condition of the women from the former East Germany which is now being integrated into West Germany. I was fortunate to have the experience of a long evening of conversation with East German women. They made it very clear that in the unification of Germany they have lost on at least four important counts:

1. loss of employment
2. loss of daycare
3. political and social equality with men is greatly eroded under the West German culture.
4. loss of abortion on demand in the first trimester

What can adult education do about this? Approximately 25 full-time adult schools in Berlin, Folk High Schools, have special courses concentrating on helping women and men to understand the new conditions and find constructive ways to deal with them, but I would still not be surprised to see some sort of uprising on the part of the East Germans. They have heavy discontent.

Thirdly, let's go to Kenya. I haven't been there now since 1985, but from what we hear in the news, and from friends who have recently returned, I think I can safely say that what I saw there still exists.

> Women carry the heaviest burden of family support, carry water, raise the crops to feed the family, also work on cash crops in the field, and try in addition to carry on some kind of income-generating project--knitting things or selling eggs or whatever. No credit allowed to women by banks, limited health care for themselves and their families which are large. They need literacy education, but often they do not have time to attend classes or they would have to walk too many miles to get to class and they have no energy left. Daughters get less schooling than boys. Land is inherited by sons only. In parts of Kenya girls still have to undergo the ritual cliterectomy--the purpose of which is to deprive them of sexual enjoyment so that they will be faithful wives.

What can adult education do? I am happy to say that The African Association for Literacy and Adult Education is doing quite a lot. Working from the concept that people can learn to solve their own problems, the Association has brought together all kinds of non-governmental social organizations, and provided training and motivation for these organizations to work together

to help their own people, accepting funding where it is available, but not allowing outside donors to dictate their values in the process of development. For instance, formerly such things as agricultural aid and training were for men, even though women raise the food for the family.

Also adult education has done something else which is significant. As slow as educational progress may be, it is nevertheless a wave that lifts all the boats. Therefore, in this day, at last, international aid organizations have heard the voice of the peoples in developing countries, and now the World Bank even speaks of the need for significant participation of the people in all decision-making.

Fourthly, I was in Thailand in January of 1990 for the ICAE conference on "Literacy and Democracy." The adult educators in Thailand did a beautiful job of coordinating this conference. They even arranged for each of us to visit some particular part of the country. I chose an overnight trip to Chaingmai and a visit to the Hill Tribes. Well, their educational and economic problems are a whole story in themselves, which I can't deal with here. What I do want to make mention of is economic situation of the Thai people who live in such poverty that they send their daughters from age 11 or so down to the posh beach resorts on the coast to live a life of prostitution to earn the money to send back to their families to keep them alive. Representatives from several women's groups in Bangkok came to spend a long evening with us there, from 7-12 p.m. explaining what this does to the thousands of young girls who live this life, not to mention the inevitability of contracting the Aids disease. Prostitution is actually illegal but the government does not act because it is the basis of much of their tourism which is a vital part of their economic base. Would you believe that the World Bank and several UN agencies actually held their very important education conference there in 1990 right in the middle of the prostitution area?

Apparently the concerned women are making themselves heard to some extent. They are trying to educate the outside world to bring pressure on their own government. You may have seen a story on 60 Minutes about this scene.

Fifthly, as for Guatemala, I have not been to Guatemala, but sometimes we can learn more from reading than we could from visiting. I recommend to you a very forceful book, dictated by a 23-year-old Indian Woman: titled, <u>I Rigoberta Menchu: An Indian Woman in Guatemala</u>. We have all heard of human rights violations in Guatemala, but here is the story of an Indian Woman leader who has lived a hundred years of torture and oppression in her short twenty-three years. This is a contemporary situation, not something that happened many years ago. How did adult education help? Because the different groups of Native Americans in Guatemala speak different languages, they have a hard time even communicating with each other, but they all have a problem in that they can not communicate in Spanish with the government.

Therefore at age 20, Rigoberta Menchu determined to learn Spanish from the nuns who were willing to teach her. She learned to speak it, but not to write, because she had very little time, since she had to continue her long days of labor in the fields while learning. She learned Spanish so that she could know and understand what the government was doing to the Native Americans and could respond to them. She was sent to Paris by resistance groups to press the cause of the Native Americans --she went to Paris because the Native Americans in Guatemala do not trust the United States. There she met the editor of this book with whom she spoke on tape for a total of 25 hours and ultimately 500 pages of transcript which was then edited down to the monologue format and then translated into English. All along the way the work on this book has been a labor of service and commitment--by Rigoberta, the editor and the translator--a labor of love for justice and humanity. I recommend it to all of you.

Lastly, I've not been to India either, but the work of the Participatory Research Network has been outstanding and should at least be mentioned because it has become a great tool for development and especially among women's groups. Participatory research is a method of development that includes education, research and action, so intertwined that all aspects proceed at the same time. The most significant feature is that people do it for themselves, sometimes with little outside help. The women have learned to investigate their own situations, educate themselves about these situations, decide on priorities for action, research action possibilities and carry out the action, which in turn brings them to the next item of priority. The Participatory Research Network sponsors training workshops for women in many countries as well as in India.

And now in closing I want to return briefly to the United States, and a challenge that is quickly coming on to our horizon. We are so used to being a multicultural country, we sometimes pay almost no attention to that fact. But we now must take our heads out of the sand. Very soon after the year 2000, we will find that one-third of our population is made of ethnic minorities. Already, according to USA TODAY, 52 of our larger cities have school populations composed of over fifty percent minority groups. Now we all know we have not done an excellent job of educating minorities in this country, not the Native Americans, not the Blacks, not the Hispanics or others. When are we going to begin and who is to rally the troops?

I believe that the current efforts we are making in adult education will have to be doubled and redoubled many times over to make sure that one-third of our women, our workers, our voters, our politicians have the best education possible, because they will have much to say about this country's future. ESL efforts are fine, but we must think beyond educating persons to the level of the minimum wage only--they need high school, university and graduate school. Not all of them and not all today, but we must have a standard for which to strive.

And that standard must be based on the respect for minority cultures. We must accept cultural pluralism as a fact and a possibility for the enrichment of society generally. And perhaps more than anything, the so-called dominant culture has to understand and care about the minorities. We have much to learn from them and they are a jewel in our crown.

Many problems and difficult situations will occur before we get a positive joyful acceptance of cultural pluralism. Nevertheless, it has to come and not in the distant future. People who feel that they are and have always been oppressed will not take it forever. Just look around the world. We already have mini-race-riots here and there in the United States today, Justice Thurgood Marshall says that racism is just under the surface, so momentous problems could be before us. Well, there is no one answer to how we may arrive at a happy cultural pluralism. We need many people to think about it, and particularly in conjunction <u>with</u> the minority groups, and I do hear about groups in our country who are doing just this.

The majority culture has a huge responsibility. When a commentator on this subject on TV was asked how we could begin, he said we could start by just being kind.

I leave it there, and say that I believe that everyone in this case is a part of the problem or a part of the solution. There is no in between, and I would like to see women in adult education be leaders in developing methods to enhance cultural pluralism in our country.